

Balboa Park panel issues report

Proposes private entity assist in management

By Jeanette Steele

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A Balboa Park Committee report states that the city will not be able to cover operation costs into the future. Above, a cyclist pedals toward the California Tower over the Laurel Street Bridge. Photo by John Gastaldo/The San Diego Union-Tribune -

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- [**Balboa Park Cultural Partnership report: Helping to build the framework for the successful governance of Balboa Park**](#) (Oct. 2008)

SAN DIEGO — A citizens committee thinks San Diego should form a private entity to help run Balboa Park -- a move that critics fear could lead to less public control over the city's much-loved but well-worn centerpiece.

The Balboa Park Committee issued its report yesterday, after nine months of study and public input at Mayor Jerry Sanders' request.

If formed, the new nonprofit group's job would be to attract new donations and take on tasks that the city's parks department doesn't already do – coordinate volunteers, for example, or manage the parking crunch, said committee Chairwoman Vicki Granowitz.

San Diego may take its script from St. Louis, whose Forest Park was just about as old, as large and as bedraggled as Balboa Park when the charity Forest Park Forever was founded in 1986.

“Forest Park in St. Louis is the model,” Granowitz said, discarding another prominent example, New York's Central Park Conservancy.

“They are a middle-class community like San Diego is, and they have a mix of different kinds of institutions,” she said.

“The other thing (about St. Louis) is the way in which the division of labor has worked out. Park and Rec keeps the things that Park and Rec is really good at, like taking care of landscaping lawns – not managing construction projects.”

This idea, which has been kicked around since at least 2006, already has some critics.

“The question is, who is this to benefit? If it is for San Diegans by San Diegans, I'm for it. If it's to create a tourist Disneyland or a valet-service park for the (museums and other cultural) institutions, I'm against it,” said City Heights attorney John Stump, a frequent activist on parks policy.

He compared the idea to the 2003 contract renegotiation at San Diego's Old Town State Park. In that instance, a New York-based company got the right to run the concession, ousting the longtime local operator.

“It's got that Old Town feel to it,” Stump said. “Another loss of San Diego management and employment.”

Granowitz said her committee is not suggesting that the city hand over the keys to anybody. The report recommends that city government keep ultimate authority of the park, including policy and land-use decisions.

“This is not privatization. This isn't about outsourcing,” said Granowitz, a North Park resident and longtime volunteer on community boards.

In St. Louis, the Forest Park Forever group started small, just as the San Diego group is suggesting, and focused on raising money to repair an historic bridge and renovate a bandstand and some statues.

The group had a budget of just more than \$3 million in 2006, the last year for which a federal tax form was available online. Of that, it spent \$2.2 million on park construction projects, landscaping, maintenance, running a visitor center and education programs. Its highest-paid official earned \$115,000 annually.

San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders wouldn't comment on the Balboa Park recommendations yesterday morning, saying the report adopted by the committee last night was still preliminary.

City Councilman Todd Gloria, whose district includes Balboa Park, called the report a "worthy proposal," adding that, "really what they are recommending is further study." The Balboa Park Committee has suggested that the city form a new task force to refine the idea.

Gloria said any talk of privatization of the park is a nonstarter.

"Balboa Park is and always will be an asset of the citizens of San Diego," Gloria said. "A separate, private nonprofit entity to help augment and complement the work that we're already doing in the park does not change that."

The gears started working toward this meeting in January. That's when a privately funded report concluded that the park was crumbling after years of getting short-shrift in the city's budget. It listed \$238 million in fix-it projects, big and small, that mostly have no funding.

Sanders asked the Balboa Park Committee, an all-volunteer group that includes park leaders and community members, to examine the situation. This summer, the group brought in officials from St. Louis to discuss how the city and its private foundation work together.

The committee's report will go to the San Diego Park and Recreation Board in January and eventually to the City Council for possible action.

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